

SKETCH
OF
GENERAL JAMES WILSON
OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

BY HON. JAMES F. BRIGGS.

MANCHESTER, N. H.
MANCHESTER HISTORIC ASSOCIATION,
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A PAPER BY HON. JAMES F. BRIGGS, READ BEFORE THE MAN-
CHESTER HISTORIC ASSOCIATION, OCTOBER 3, 1900.

MR. PRESIDENT : I regret that the duty of furnishing a sketch of the life and public services of Hon. James Wilson, late of Keene, N. H., had not been assigned to some one better qualified to do justice to the memory of this remarkable man. By way of introduction, with your permission, I desire to say a few words of his father, James Wilson, to show the seed from which he sprang.

James Wilson, the father of James Wilson, Jr., was born in Peterboro, N. H., in 1757. He fitted for college at Phillips Academy, at Andover, Mass.; entered Harvard in 1785; and graduated in 1789. He was reputed to be one of the most skillful wrestlers in college, which was then the test of championship. He took the badge in his Freshman year and retained it during his whole course. His distinction in this particular was justified by the remark of John Quincy Adams to his son, "Long Jim," when he learned his parentage, "Your father was the best wrestler in college."

On his graduation he entered the office of Judge Lincoln of Worcester, Mass., as a student of the law. He remained with Judge Lincoln until December, 1790, when he was called home on account of the death of his father. He remained in Peterboro from that time, completing his studies with Judge Jeremiah Smith then in practice in the town of Peterboro. He was admitted to the New Hampshire Bar in 1792. Judge Smith having been elected to Congress from New Hampshire, and continuing in that office for several succeeding years finally, removed to Exeter and Mr. Wilson continued his practice in his

native town, until his removal to Keene in the year 1815. He retired from the active professional duties of his office on the admission of his son to the bar, in 1823, and devoted his time to his private affairs.

James Wilson, Sr., is represented to have been a good lawyer, familiar with the science of the law, a man of quick preception, careful and thorough in the preparation of his cases, and he conducted them before the court and jury with marked ability and success.

His practice in Cheshire and Hillsborough counties was extensive, and he was generally retained on one side or the other in every important case. When asked by Mr. Levi Chamberlain why he did not address the reason of the jury instead of their feelings, he replied: "Too small a mark; too small a mark for me to hit."

James Wilson was elected from the Hillsborough District of New Hampshire a Representative in the Eleventh Congress of the United States as a Federalist. He served with distinction from May 22, 1809, to March 3, 1811. His term of service, though brief, was one that no descendant of his, familiar with his services, but will be proud of the record he made.

There were many young men in New Hampshire who were students in his office who afterwards achieved distinction in their profession. Among them were Gen. James Miller, John Wilson, David Smiley, Thomas F. Goodhue, Zaccheus Parker, Stephen P. Steele, David Scott, Charles J. Stewart, and Matthew Perkins. After he removed to Keene his students were David Steele, Amos Parker, Amasa Edes, and his son James Wilson, Jr. Mr. Wilson held many offices of trust and honor in his native town. He was moderator from 1800 to 1814; and representative to the Legislature from 1803 to 1815. He was a member of Congress from the Hillsborough District from 1809 to 1811, being the first two years of President Madison's administration. He was an old-fashioned Federalist. He was a grateful, dutiful son, a good husband, a sympathetic parent, very kind to his children and to all his friends; a good citizen, and noble-heart-

ed man. He was industrious, just, vigilant in all matters of business. He died at Keene, January 4, 1839, universally respected and lamented, at the age of 73 years.

James Wilson, Jr., was born in Peterboro, N. H., March 18, 1797, and died at Keene, N. H., May 29, 1881. He was the son of James Wilson and Elizabeth Steele. His early life was passed in his native town, with only such educational privileges as were there to be had, which at that early day were very limited. His mother became an invalid when her son James was only two years old, and remained so during the remainder of her life, thus depriving him of that kind, maternal care and attention so indispensable to the proper development of a young mind. She departed this life when he was in the ninth year of his age.

In the year 1807, young Wilson was sent for a few months to the academy at New Ipswich. In 1808, he was sent to the Atkinson Academy, where he remained for some three or four years. In the year 1813, he attended Phillips (Exeter) Academy, at Exeter, N. H., for some six months.

Our country was then involved in war with Great Britain, and young Wilson at sixteen years of age was desirous of joining the American army, as some of his acquaintances but little older than himself had already done. His father would not give his consent to his son's enlistment, and he was not old enough to be subject to the draft. Disappointed at being deprived of the privilege of entering upon a military career, he left Exeter, and returning to his native town he went into the North Factory at Peterboro, and continued to work there from the Autumn of 1813 until the Spring of 1815, when peace between the United States and England was proclaimed. Young Wilson went home in the Spring and worked on his father's farm as a common farm-laborer. In the Autumn of that year, as his father was about removing to Keene, the son picked up his books and went back to his studies.

He entered Middlebury College (Vt.) in 1816; graduated from that institution in 1820; entered his father's office at Keene as a

student at law, and was admitted to the bar in Cheshire county, N. H., at the Fall term, 1823.

His father, James Wilson, Sr., retired from the active professional duties of his office on the admission of his son to the bar, and the young man attaining to his father's business, continued to practice law in Cheshire, Sullivan, Grafton, and Coös counties, until the year 1836, when by a stroke of paralysis his father became unable to attend to his own private affairs, and then required his son's assistance. He then gave up the Northern counties and continued the practice of law in Cheshire county.

On leaving college in 1820, and fixing his residence at Keene, James Wilson, Jr., entered the military service of the State. He was elected Captain of the Keene Light Infantry on the first day of January, 1821, and continued in the militia, constantly doing duty, until 1839, when he resigned the office of Major-General of the Third Division of the New Hampshire Militia.

At the March election in 1825, he was chosen as one of the two Representatives from the town of Keene to the State Legislature.

In 1828, he was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives of New Hampshire, the duties of which he performed with signal ability to the acceptance of all parties. In that House there were several men of distinguished reputation and of prominent standing in the Whig party, such as the Hon. Ezekiel Webster, the Hon. Benjamin M. Farley, the Hon. Joseph Bell, the Hon. Parker Noyes, and others from different parts of the State. From the year 1825 to the year 1840 inclusive, he represented the town of Keene in the State Legislature every year, except 1833, 1838, and 1839. The last two years, namely, 1838 and 1839, he was the candidate of the Whig party in the State for Governor, but was defeated by his Democratic opponent.

The year 1840 was a year of great political awakening in this country. The Democratic party had nominated Martin Van Buren for President of the United States for a second term.

The Whigs went into the political battle under the banner of 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too,' 'and with them' determined to 'beat little Van.' The Whigs succeeded. Gen. James Wilson, of New Hampshire ('Long Jim,' as he was familiarly called), did a good deal of political service in that campaign. He stumped almost all the New England states, spoke several times in Pennsylvania, and gave a whole month's work, on the stump, in the State of New York, Mr. Van Buren's state. Mr. Van Buren lost New York, Pennsylvania, and most of the New England States, and was defeated.

Gen. Harrison was elected President, and John Tyler Vice-President. They were inaugurated on the 4th of March, 1841. Gen. Harrison lived only one month after his inauguration, and Mr. Tyler succeeded to the Presidency. About June, 1841, Mr. Tyler offered to Gen. Wilson the office of Surveyor-General of the Public Lands in the then Territories of Wisconsin and Iowa, which office he accepted, and took possession of the Surveyor-General's office, at Dubuque, Iowa, in the early part of the summer. He continued to hold that office and to perform its duties for four years. In 1845, James K. Polk having been elected President, he was removed.

In 1846, the voters of the town of Keene returned Gen. Wilson again, as their representative, to the General Court. That year the Whigs and a party styling themselves 'Independent Democrats' succeeded in defeating the regular old line Democracy in New Hampshire. The State was districted for the choice of Representatives to Congress, and the following year he was elected Representative from the Third Congressional District to the Thirtieth Congress. He was re-elected to the Thirty-First Congress, and held his seat until the 9th day of September, 1850, when he resigned and left this Eastern country for California. He resided in California eleven years continuously, and only returned East at the breaking out of the of the Civil War in 1861. On meeting his old friend Abraham Lincoln, then President of the United States, Mr. Lincoln offered him a Brigadier-General's commission in the

army of the United States, which offer Gen. Wilson declined, for the reason of his advanced age and his physical infirmities. He remained East about a year and a half, giving such aid and moral support as he could to the Union cause. He returned to California in the Autumn of 1862, and resided there until 1867, when he left the Pacific coast and returned to his old home in Keene, to live out the residue of his days among his old friends and acquaintances who had been so true and kind to him throughout so many, many years. In 1870 and 1871, the voters of Keene elected him again to represent them in the General Court of the State of New Hampshire.

He was married to Mary L. Richardson, of Montpelier, Vt., November 26, 1823. His wife died in 1848.

Their children were : Mary, born Oct. 27, 1826, (she married John Sherwood of New York); James E., born 1827, died March 9, 1832; William R., born Nov. 2, 1830, died March 17, 1834; Annie F., born Sept. 23, 1832, (she married Col. Francis S. Fisk); Charlotte F., born Aug. 31, 1835, she (married Frank S. Taintor of New York); James H., born Dec. 4, 1837; Daniel W., born Feb. 13, 1841, died Jan. 18, 1846.

He was widely known as a military man, a lawyer, and an orator. His power of addressing and holding jurors, and a great multitude in times of excitement was extraordinary as will be illustrated in the instances hereafter recorded.

His celebrated speech at the Peterboro Centennial received universal commendation. It was in part as follows :

" Mr. President : I regret that I am called upon to respond to the sentiment which has just been announced, and received with so much approbation by this great assembly. Upon looking over the list of sentiments yesterday, I was informed that the one just read was designed to call out that highly-respected, time honored gentleman, Hon. Jeremiah Smith, of Exeter, a man who feels proud of the place of his nativity, and who on all proper occasions has a good word to say of and for old Peterboro. We should have been delighted to have seen that venerable and venerated man here, and to have heard him, in his usual elo-

quent and forcible manner, his reminiscences of by-gone times.

He has indeed grown old, but not old enough yet to forget any good thing. His mind is richly stored with varied learning, and his knowledge of the early history of the town, the peculiarities of its early inhabitants, his great fund of wit and anecdote connected with the first settlers, very far exceeds that of any living man; and there is now no one of the emigrants who could so well give an apt response to your highly complimentary sentiment as that worthy octogenarian. I was heart-pained to learn last evening that his attendance is prevented by physical infirmity. In his absence I could have wished that another highly respected son of Peterboro, of the Smith family, had been here to have spoken in our behalf. I allude to one more nearly allied to you, Mr. President, your eldest son, my most esteemed friend. We are of nearly the same age. Our friendship dates back to the days of our childhood. Our intimacy commenced in that little, square, hipped-roof schoolhouse that formerly stood between your homestead and the homestead of my honored father. It was an intimacy in the outset characterized by the ardor of youth, and grew with our increasing years into the strong and unwavering friendship of mature manhood. There has never been a moment's estrangement. For thirty years no frost has chilled it, nor can it grow cold until the clods shall rumble upon our coffins. Glad, indeed, should I have been to have met once more my friend here, to have grasped him by the hand, to have looked upon his slender form and his pale features, to have listened to the tones of his clear voice, to have caught and treasured up the sentiments of a mind as clear as the atmosphere upon the summits of our native hills, and a heart as pure as the fountains that gush from their base. From the sad tidings that I hear of his declining health, I fear that I shall never meet him on this side the grave. May a merciful God bless him.

Well may Peterboro express her joy at the success of her absent sons, and pride herself upon them when she numbers such men as these among them.

Your sentiment, sir, breathes the prayer that we, the emigrants, may not forget the place of our nativity. I can hardly realize that I am an emigrant. True, sir, a wave of Providence has taken me up, wafted me onward, and cast me upon land not far distant. Although my domicile is in another place, it is here that I seem most at home. It is here that I enjoy all those pleasures derived from early recollection and early associations. It is here that every natural object that meets my eye has some story to relate of high interest to my mind; here every house and tree, stump and stone, hill and brook, presents to me image of some old, familiar, well-loved friend. It is here that I meet my earliest friends, and their greeting seems warmer, and more cordial than elsewhere. It was here that I first enjoyed that substantial Peterboro hospitality so well understood and so highly appreciated by every one at all acquainted with the people of the town some some thirty years ago. Let me not be understood, Mr. President, as drawing a comparison unfavorable to the good people with whom I am in more immediate intercourse at the present time. No, sir, I reside among an excellent and a worthy community, to whom I am bound in a large debt of gratitude. They have manifested toward me a kindness and a confidence vastly beyond my merits; and I am sure they will not esteem me the less for finding me susceptible of emotion at the recollections and fond associations of my childhood. Forget Peterboro. How can I forget her? Why, sir, I was born just over there. The bones of my ancestors, both paternal and maternal, are deposited just over there. And among them there repose the remains of my mother. Oh, sir, it would be cold and heartless ingratitude to forget the place where one's earliest and best friend slumbers in death.

“Ingratitude. Thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child,
Than the sea-monster.”

Spare me, oh, spare me such a reproach. My prayer to Heaven is, that when these eyes shall grow dim, this tongue become dumb, when these lungs shall cease to heave, and this

heart to throw off a pulsation, then this head and limbs may be laid to crumble down to dust by side of thine, my mother.

* * * * *

I have watched with intense interest the wonderful improvements that have been carried forward in my native town within the last thirty years. When I was a boy, a weekly mail, carried upon horseback by a very honest old man by the name of Gibbs, afforded all the mail facilities which the business of the town required. Now, sir, we see a stage-coach pass and re-pass through this beautiful village every day, loaded with passengers and transporting a heavy mail. Your highways and bridges have been astonishingly improved, showing a praiseworthy liberality on the part of the town to that important subject. Your progress in agriculture, manufactures, and the mechanic arts exhibits striking evidence of the progress of improvement. Look abroad now upon the finely cultivated fields, the substantial fences, the comfortable, yea, elegant dwellings, the superb manufacturing buildings, the splendid churches and seminaries of learning, and in view of all these let the mind for a moment contrast it with the prospect which presented itself to the eye of the first settler as he attained the summit of East mountain one hundred years ago. Then not a human habitation for the eye to repose on over the whole extent of this basin-like township — one unbroken forest throughout the eye's most extensive range. No sound of music or hum of cheerful industry saluted his ear. It was only the howl of the savage beast, or the yell of the still more savage man, that broke the appalling stillness of the forest. What a wonderful change a hundred years hath wrought here, and what unshrinking energy of character was requisite to induce the commencement of the undertaking.

Some of the old objects of interest to me in my younger days are gone; their places, indeed, have been supplied by more expensive and elegant structures. Still, I must say, I regret their loss. And let me ask, Mr. President, are you quite sure that the loss may not manifest itself in some future time? I allude,

sir, to the loss of the old church on the hill there, and the old beech tree tree that stood hard by. I look, even at this period of life, upon that spot with a kind of superstitious reverence. Many are the noble resolutions that young minds have formed under the shade of the old beech tree. Intellectual indolence is the prevailing fault of our times. Under the old beech, in my young days, the great and the talented men of this town used to assemble, and there discuss with distinguished power and ability the most important topics. Religion, politics, literature agriculture, and various other important subjects were there discussed. Well, distinctly well, do I remember those debates carried on by the Smiths, the Morrisons, the Steeles, the Holmes, the Robbes, the Scotts, the Todds, the Millers, and perhaps I may be excused for adding the Wilsons and others. No absurd proposition or ridiculous idea escaped exposure for a single moment. A debater there had to draw himself up close, be precise in his logic, and correct in his language to command respectful attention. A bler discussion was never listened to anywhere. Strong thought and brilliant conceptions broke forth in clear and select language. They were reading men, talking men, forcibly talking men, and sensible men. Bright intellectual sparks were constantly emanating from those great native minds, and, falling upon younger minds, kindled their slumbering energies to subsequent nobler exertion. The immediate effect of those discussions could be easily traced in the beaming eye and the agitated muscles of the excited listeners. It was obvious to an acute observer that there was a powerful effort going on in many a young mind among the hearers, to seize, retain, and examine some of the grand ideas that had been started by the talkers. This rousing of the young mind to manly exertion, and aiding it in arriving at a consciousness of its own mighty powers, was of great advantage where the seeds of true genius had been planted by the hand of nature. If any of the Peterboro boys, within the last thirty years, have attained to anything like intellectual greatness, my life on it, they date the commencement of their prog-

ress from the scenes under the old beech tree. A thousand times have I thought, Mr. President, if I had the world's wealth at my command I would cheerfully have bartered it all for the ability to talk as well as those men talked. Antiquity may boast of her schools of philosophy; the present may point to her debating clubs and lyceums, and talk loud as it will of modern improvement; give me the sound good sense that rolled unrestrained from eloquent lips under the old beech, and it is of more worth than all. I shall always respect the spot where it grew, and even now it grieves me to see the greensward that sheltered its roots torn too roughly by the ploughshare.

I had purposed, Mr. President, to have asked the attention of the audience to some few remarks on the all-important subject of education. Old Peterboro has hitherto given her full share of educated men to the public, and I cannot but hope that she will not now permit her neighbors to go ahead of her in this particular. The shades of evening, however, admonish me that I must not trespass further. I must tender my thanks to the audience for the very kind and polite attention they have given me during my remarks. I have felt constrained to make at this late hour in the afternoon. Allow me to say in conclusion: The sons and daughters of Peterboro, native and adopted: in all good deeds may they prove themselves worthy of the noble stock that has gone before them.

General Wilson was greatly interested in military affairs. He was appointed Captain of the Keene Light Infantry January 1, 1821, and successfully passed through all the various ranks until he was appointed Major-General in the Third Division of the New Hampshire Militia. He continued in the service until 1839, when he resigned. At this time there were very few military men his equal.

He was a strict disciplinarian, popular with his soldiers and brought his command to a high state of proficiency. June 28, 1833, Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, visited Concord, N. H. This was the great day at the capital. Thousands of people gathered at Concord from all parts of the State

to pay their respect to the President. He was accompanied by Vice-President Martin Van Buren, Secretary of War Lewis Cass, Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury, Major Andrew 'J. Donelson, Secretary of the President, and many distinguished men were present.

The military display was of the highest order. It consisted of eight picked companies. The best disciplined, the most efficient, the largest and the best drilled was the celebrated Keene Light Infantry commanded by 'Gen. James Wilson. This company attracted the attention and excited the admiration of General Jackson and its Captain was personally congratulated for its fine appearance by him.

General Wilson was the most striking and attractive person that I ever met. He was a giant physically as well as intellectually. Wherever he went, whatever he did, he attracted the attention of all who saw him. He was beloved by his friends, honored by the people, and idolized by his family. There was a charm about his personality that made all who knew him ever hold him in loving remembrance. New Hampshire never had a son more widely loved than Gen. Wilson. "He was six feet and four inches in height, well built, erect, with deep set bright blue eyes, a wealth of black, curly hair, stern and determined, yet fascinating, countenance," and often spoke of himself as a rough hewn block from the Granite State, and everywhere was spoken of by his friends as "Long Jim Wilson." As a lawyer he was able and successful, and won a high reputation. As an advocate he had few equals and no superior. Before juries his eloquence was irresistible. He could excite them to laughter or move them to tears at his will. When appealing to the sympathy of the jury his opponents would often say, "Wilson is boring for water," or "pumping for tears."

Gen. Wilson as an orator was unequalled. His power of addressing and holding great multitudes in times of excitement was wonderful. He took an active part in the Presidential campaign of 1840 and proved himself to be one of the most eloquent and efficient popular orators of his time.

Ex-Governor Bell, in his "Bench and Bar," says of him as follows : " His qualifications for this were unequalled ; his physique was on a majestic scale ; his voice sonorous ; his language was the purest vernacular ; his logic had the grip of the vise ; he was always prodigiously in earnest ; his illustrations and witty sallies were irresistible and he often broke out in strains of bold and moving eloquence."

There are many anecdotes told of him, illustrating his wonderful influence over the crowds that gathered to hear him.

He often captured his hearers by the opening sentence of his speech. He began one of them, I think, in New York, " I am six feet and four in my stockings and every inch a Whig."

At one of his outdoor meetings in 1840, in the Harrison campaign, a shower came up which threatened to disperse the audience. He deliberately pulled off his coat (as usual) and began, " The only rain that I have any fear of is the reign of Martin Van Buren." He had hearers enough after that.

In some of the States farther west it was the custom of both parties to hold public meetings on the same day in the same field. When speakers occupied stands not far apart he captured the entire crowd and on one occasion he left not a single hearer for the other side.

At the first meeting of the Sons of New Hampshire in Boston, in 1843, he was present and called upon to speak to the sentiment, " The families we left behind." Many speakers had preceded him and their speeches if good were rather formal, but when Gen. Wilson rose to speak the tones of a hearty, sympathetic voice roused the feelings of his audience and his touching picture of the old folk at home stirred every heart to its depth. " We will go back," said he, " and tell the mothers and sisters how well the boys behave when they are away from home." This speech gave voice to the genuine feeling of all hearts and was welcomed with cheering, earnest, prolonged and again and again renewed.

The fame of Gen. Wilson as an orator was well known in New Hampshire. When I was a boy, living in Holderness,

N. H., now Ashland, I saw a poster announcing that James Wilson would address the people at Wentworth on a certain day. Although then a minor I determined to go. It was a stormy day ; the snow was deep and I braved the storm and arrived at Wentworth in season for the meeting.

It was held in the church and before Mr. Wilson appeared it was filled to its utmost capacity. I sat near the pulpit when Mr. Wilson came in. His immense physique, his dark, rough features, curly, black hair and deep set, blue eyes will never be forgotten. The meeting was promptly called to order and Gen. Wilson began his speech. He held the vast audience for over two hours with such a speech as I never had listened to before, and never have since heard surpassed. His speech was upon the political issues that divided the political parties.

It was a masterly effort, forcible, eloquent, and unanswerable. The applause was hearty, frequent, and prolonged. He drew a parallel between the slave states and the free states ; the condition between the laborers in the south and at the north ; the political power exercised by the south in the government over the north. He declared it not only the right but the duty of the north to prevent the extension of slavery over the free territories of the United States. He clearly, frankly, and fearlessly defined his position upon the questions involved in the contest and closed amid cheers and hearty congratulations of his friends.

The fame of Gen. Wilson as an orator was already known in Washington when he entered the National House of Representatives, and while there he made several speeches, but facilities for reporting them were not equal to those of today and but a few brief reports of them are preserved. His great speech on the slavery question, on February 19, 1848, attracted great attention.

One who was present tells me that he went into the House and found it filled to its utmost capacity. This person went into the Senate chamber first and found it almost deserted. Then he went over to the house, and found most of the Sena-

ors there. Wilson had just begun his speech. The House was still, no clapping for pages, no moving about, but all were attentively listening to Gen. Wilson and his voice was clear and sonorous and reached every part of the House.

He possessed great power of statement. His utterance was rapid, but his enunciation was distinct. At times he was gentle and sympathetic ; at others, bold and aggressive ; but the whole speech was a remarkable illustration of his power as an orator and established his reputation as one of the most eloquent men of his day. He was repeatedly interrupted by applause, and at the conclusion of his speech he was greeted with round and round and most heartily and warmly congratulated by his friends.

An anecdote of William P. Wheeler, the gentleman who succeeded Gen. Wilson as leader of the Cheshire county bar, gives a glimpse of Wilson on the stump in 1840. Sometime during the sixties Mr. Wheeler made a pleasure trip west and during the trip took a steamer ride down the Ohio. A gentleman familiar with the river began to describe objects of interest. Learning Mr. Wheeler was from Keene he begged him to tell him about Gen. Wilson. After satisfying his curiosity, Mr. Wheeler said he would be glad to learn how a resident of Ohio knew about Gen. Wilson enough to become an ardent admirer.

" It happened this way," replied the gentleman : " Business obliged me to make a trip to Albany, N. Y., in 1840, during the height of the presidential campaign. My business having been accomplished, I prepared to return home. On arriving at the railway station, I found my train did not leave for a little over an hour and to while away the time I went outside and looked about. In an open space near at hand a stand for public speaking had been erected and a few people had already gathered about the stand. From a poster I learned that the eloquent Gen. James Wilson of Keene, N. H., was about to deliver an address. Hearing the approaching band, I walked up to the stand, for I always made it a point to hear good speakers whenever the opportunity offers. I confess when Gen. Wilson was introduced I was greatly disappointed, for I could not be-

lieve that this dark, rugged looking giant could be a great orator. When he began to speak my mind changed, for from the moment that I heard his voice I stood spell-bound. A second's pause enabled me to consult my watch, and to my intense astonishment I found my train must have been gone several minutes for I had been listening over an hour utterly oblivious to the passage of time. With a sigh of relief I remembered there was another train an hour later and I turned to listen to the fascinating speaker I had heard. I determined this time to keep track of the time and not miss the next train. Again I listened with breathless attention. Glancing at my watch I discovered I had just twenty minutes left to catch my train. Again had I been totally unconscious of the flight of time. Although it was not over five minutes' walk to the station I did not dare listen further, for if I did I knew I should miss my train a second time. I resolutely faced about and started for the station. Imagine my astonishment. When I first faced the speaker, perhaps 200 people were present. Now I was facing a great audience of from 8,000 to 10,000 people (the papers said the larger number). I had been so completely engrossed in listening that I had been utterly unconscious of the addition to the assemblage. It took me over half an hour to work my passage through that crowd and if Gen. Wilson had not closed his speech I might never have got through it. I again missed my train and was obliged to wait for a night train. I shall always regret that I did not wait and hear the close of that wonderful address. Every one who came in range of his wonderful voice had been drawn to the speaker and held by him just as a powerful magnet attracts and holds iron filings."

Hon. John P. Hale said that his first opportunity to hear Gen. Wilson speak was on April 22, 1861. The war had begun and word was sent to all the neighboring towns that Gen. Wilson was in Keene on a visit and would address a mass meeting in Central Square, Keene, on that day. Long before the hour the Square was crowded. He was on hand early and got a good position near the speaker's stand. The band and many citizens

went to Wilson's house and escorted his carriage to the stand. Describing the moment when the carriage arrived, McClintock's "History of New Hampshire" says :

"When the door was opened and the familiar form of the old hero was seen mounting the rostrum, such tumultuous applause was heard as was never known in Keene before." Being but a schoolboy I don't remember much of the address, but the effect of his appeal for volunteers was electrical. When the old man, so crippled by rheumatism that he could not walk without a cane, took his seat, men started for the platform to enlist from all parts of the audience. Some could not wait to go around to the steps but climbed over the railings. Describing the closing of this speech, McClintock's "History of New Hampshire" says : "It was a scene never to be forgotten by those who were present ; and it did much good, the immediate effect being to add many names to the rolls of the enlistments."

As illustrating the power of Wilson's eloquence, the following incident will serve to show that it was a kind not dependent on favoring conditions. When making the survey of Iowa, it was found that many squatters had settled in certain sections of the State, and these sections they declared should not be surveyed. In due time Wilson with his outfit of surveyors arrived near the settlement of the most turbulent gang of squatters in the State. Needing supplies, he sent one of his men to the nearest trading post to purchase what was wanted, with instructions to return and get the camp team if he found he could get what he needed. The supplies were purchased and paid for, but when the team arrived delivery was refused, and the man returned and stated that the post was full of roughs, who had learned in some way that the supplies were for the United States surveyors. Seeing the critical moment was at hand, Wilson went at once to the store, accompanied by several of his men and his younger brother Robert, (in after years Col. "Bob" of the Fourteenth New Hampshire). The two Wilsons entered the store and asked the proprietor if certain goods had been bought and paid for ;

if so, why he refused to deliver them? Then the roughs declared they had taken possession of the store and until they were dispossessed no delivery could be made. Wilson turned to his brother and said: "Bob, these gentlemen seem a little diffident about going out alone. If you will escort them to the door, I will see them safely out."

Robert Wilson, while not as tall as the General, was about as heavy; he was an expert boxer and wrestler, and almost a match in strength for the General himself. He seized the nearest man and flung him to the General, who pitched him headlong out. In a couple of minutes a dozen men had been spread-eagled over that section of Iowa. They scrambled to their feet, scraped their eyes and noses clear of subsoil, freed their mouths of grass roots, drew their weapons and made ready for a fight to the death.

Seeing "Bob" was in possession, Wilson coolly stepped outside and said, "Boys, I got a word to say." It would not seem as if he had selected an especially favorable opportunity for speech making. In five minutes these men, who thirsted for his blood, were subjected; in ten, they were wildly cheering him; in fifteen, the United States surveyors were their long lost brothers. They rallied about Wilson, eager to shake his hand. They insisted on loading his team with supplies, and then escorted him in triumph to his camp. Wilson had won their allegiance, not only to himself but to the government. The next day the competition for the privilege of carrying the chains and flags for the surveyors became strong. Their camp was kept supplied with game, and the roughest neighborhood in Iowa became a picnic ground for the camp of surveyors. Not content with this they sent word ahead that anything they could do was not too good for Wilson, and charged their friends to see that he lacked nothing they could supply. By the magic of his tongue Wilson had changed a band of lawless desperadoes into friends as loyal to his bidding as the tribesmen of a Scottish chieftain.

The following sketch of General Wilson, written by Moses A.

Cartland, describes him so fully and accurately, that I will give it entire as it came from the pen of the gifted author. It was written many years ago by this personal friend of Gen. Wilson.

"Almost everybody in this state knows General Wilson by the familiar, but not very elegant, cognomen, "Long Jim." Still, there is more meaning and appropriateness in it than a fastidious ear might be aware of. 'Long,' he certainly is — though not an Anak, nor stretched to the immeasurable length of 'Long John' of Chicago. And, to his credit, he is one of those unsophisticated and unstarched men who may be Jimmed without offending their delicacy or detracting from their integrity. There are some such men who boast no royal pride, but pass along, in republican simplicity, claiming the humblest citizen as a brother, and saying to the highest, as Black Hawk did to the President, 'I am a man, and you are another.' 'Don't thee and thou us,' said the pompous justices of England to the plain, blunt Quaker, Fox. 'Use such familiarities to our servants, but not to magistrates,' said they. And a good deal of that stiffening has crept down into the veins of these democratic times. The Quakers used to take Washington by the hand, while President of the United States, and address him, as Penn had the king before, simply as 'George.' The great man seemed rather pleased with a greeting which bespoke the fraternizing affection of home, and often reciprocated it with the like simplicity of a brother. Some little sprig of aristocracy, better furnished with broadcloth than with brains, would have resented a familiarity that made him but 'common clay.'

"But not to dwell on these things, it must be admitted that Gen. Wilson is distinguished, in an eminent degree, for simple, unostentatious habits in his intercourse, and unvarying courtesy of demeanor. He probably feels that he is a man, and not an ape. Not a mere buckram fop or dandy — one of those precious things, so numerous in sunny weather, that

'Present a body which, at most,
Is less substantial than a ghost.'

"Had Robert Burns been an orator instead of a poet, there

would have been a very striking resemblance between him and Gen. Wilson. And there is reason for this ; for the latter is of Scottish descent, and his veins are full of Scotch feelings and fire, tempered with that earnest, Irish enthusiasm, which he derives from one branch of his ancestral line. Those who know anything of the noble hearted, strong-willed poet, will see very strong points of resemblance between them. The same wild scenes of nature, the same

‘ Land of the mountain and the flood.
Of dark brown heath and shaggy wood,’

first opened alike to their youthful eyes. Burns, in his boyhood, followed the plough, and pressed his wild, free feet to the old Caledonian hills ; while the American boy bent to the same rustic employment, and learned freedom like him in our own beloved Scotland. The same free, generous, and impetuous spirit that swelled in the bosom of one, now characterizes the other. Alike in disdaining the folly of lordly life and the ‘ rattling equipage ’ of wealth and fashion, the same glorious spirit of independence that Burns worshipped, as ‘ lord of the lion heart and eagle eye,’ is equally the idol of the New Hampshire orator. If the music of the one fell like a transcendent charm upon the Scottish ear, no less potent, in a different capacity, is the voice of the other to stir the pulse or win the heart. The same martial fire, the same restless and indignant hatred of tyranny, that burned in the Scotchman’s veins, now runs in the American’s.

“ Compare them physically, and the same resemblance is apparent ; with an exception, however, for the eye of Burns was the most distinctive feature of his face. Poetry lingered in its radiance ; and when the bard felt the struggling of the mighty nature within him, his eye is said to have burned and kindled with an ‘ almost insufferable light.’ In Gen. Wilson, the same feature is often lighted up with terrible power. To a stranger, Gen. Willson would not appear the lion he actually is when aroused and in the midst of one of his impassioned strains of eloquence — as Charles Lamb has said of books —

that is eloquence. He would then be taken for some hard-faced ploughman, ungifted with that 'mighty magic' which puts a tongue in everything that leads an assembly captive. I have attended public meetings when he was to address the people, and noted the curious inquiries and sage remarks of those who had never before seen him, and knew nothing of his powers as a speaker. Plainly attired, and in the most unstudied manner, he would enter the house and sit in modest carelessness awaiting the gathering of his audience. No stranger eye would be fixed on him as the hero of the scene. 'Where is he?' would be the inquiry. 'There he is — that coarse looking man, bending forward, with the aspect of a long 'Vermont Jonathan,' would be the reply. 'That Gen. Wilson? — why, he don't look as though he could say anything. See, there, I guess your phrenology is all knocked in the head now. He looks like an old plough-jogger.' Such would be the comments. But he speaks — at first with the simplicity and courteous phraseology that distinguishes the gallant man always. He stretches himself up — raises his stentorian voice as he warms with his subject — period upon period goes rolling out upon the audience, and echoing back and up like ocean tones of the sea. The orator seems laboring and dashing forward like one of those 'oak leviathans' of the deep, crushing the haughty waves beneath its keel, and wrestling onward against the tempest. It is then you begin to realize the awakening of that 'dormant thunder' which you so little dreamed was sleeping in that awkward form and unpromising aspect. You are borne onward by the impetuous current, or stirred by some startling picture of political folly or aggravated wrong, until it would seem as though the old dead had been summoned back to rebuke the living.

"But in all this there is no ungenerous taunt — no flippant blackguardism — no impeachment of his opponent's motives or abilities, but an exhibition of the loftier and better feelings. In this respect Gen. Wilson occupies a more elevated position than most of the political orators of the day. He scorns the tricks and slang of the demagogue. He never descends to them.

His language is chosen with even the nice taste of the scholar ; and while his periods oftentimes exhibit a peculiar beauty and finish, they are full of energy and charmed with fire — ‘as lighting lurks in the drops of the summer clouds.’ He never caters to the vulgar appetite which riots in abusive epithet and unmanly detraction. Nor does he ever stop to repel the base attack and calumny so rife in partizan warfare. But he stands up like the storm-defying pillar, that mocks alike the fury of the tempest and the wave, and he bears his head aloft into the sunshine and bids them beat on.”

The following is an extract from a speech by Gen. James Wilson on the Slavery Question, February 16, 1849.

It has been said by some one, that ‘man is the child of circumstance.’ It is a sage remark, and true ; and to me it is not surprising that gentlemen should entertain different opinions, and should rise here in debate and express opposite views upon the subject of slavery. I know, can feel, and realize, that my own views and opinions are influenced much by the impressions received in childhood ; and while I am conscious of that in myself, it is but just to infer that other men are influenced by the circumstances by which they were surrounded during the receptive period of early life. It excites no marvel in my mind that gentlemen who have first seen the light of day in the South — who have first opened their eyes to the realities of life under the auspices of that institution — who were early taught to command and that it was their right to be obeyed — who had but to say to a certain class of individuals around them, ‘Come,’ and they would come ; ‘Go,’ and they would go. I can very well understand how it is that gentlemen, accustomed from their childhood to command, being nurtured in this way up to the condition of manhood, should entertain entirely different opinions from those which I, and those which have been brought up as I have been, entertained. In the northern States of this Union, we are taught from childhood to look upon labor as the condition of life ; to think from the outset that we are born to labor. The child is instructed and made to know that if he wants any-

thing done within the compass of his own ability, he must do it for himself. He is encouraged to effort, and compelled, if need be, to make it. Labor becomes habit.

I have said, sir, that in the free labor States of this Union, even the little children are required to labor according to their intellectual ability and physical strength. Even from its cradle it is put to work. It is aroused from its morning slumbers to be greeted by the smiles of a kind mother, and is encouraged to make the effort to do for itself what it may be able to do. It is not, to be sure, furnished with the heavy tools, the drills and hammers, picks and gads, of the miner, and sent to sink shafts in trap rock of limestone, in search of copper ore ; it is not furnished with a spade and windlass, rope and tub, and sent away to sink its shaft in clay diggings, in search of lead mineral. No, sir ; but its morning bath and wardrobe attended to, and its breakfast finished, it has its working tools, consisting of some simple books and carefully arranged in a little satchel, wrought all over with pictures of birds, and butterflies, and flowers, in gay colors, by the hand of a kind sister. Thus equipped, it is sent away to the village school, to work — to work. It begins to sink its shaft down into its own intellect ; it sinks on and on, deeper and deeper. Encouraged by its success, it perseveres, until, by and by, it brings up to view, and for the use of mankind, treasures infinitely more valuable than the gold from the mines of Mexico, or Peru, or California — gems more brilliant than ever sparkled upon the brow of queen, or blazed in the hall of royalty.

I undertake, to say that, for the last fifty years of the history of this government, this great slavery question has been the very center and focus of all our political action : the focal point around which every great national interest has revolved.

I might illustrate by comparison with the movements of the planets in their orbits around the natural sun. The figure of speech would not be quite accurate and appropriate, because when we speak of the natural sun, we convey to the mind the idea of light and heat, warmth and life-giving energy through-

out the sphere of its influence ; while that central point of our political action is as black and dark as Egyptian darkness ; as cold and heartless, and unsympathizing as the icebergs that roll in the Arctic ocean.

* * * * *

There was then, a certain, distinct, and definite tract of country, to which the Constitution of the United States was to apply. And now let me ask any member of the committee to take the journal of that convention in his hand, and say whether he could believe that the men of that convention, who were brought together for the purpose of framing a Constitution for the United States, did, in fact, form an instrument with all the properties of a monstrous gum-elastic overshoe inverted, the toe of which could be drawn on over the north pole, the heel hitched down over some tall mountain near the Isthmus of Darien ? The very idea is too preposterous to be entertained for a moment by any sensible man of fair, impartial mind.

* * * * *

I desire to acquit myself, that my own conscience will not upbraid me, and that, when I shall pass away, no reproach shall fall on me, or my children after me, for my acts here on this momentous question. I have, sir, an only son, now a little fellow, whom some of this committee may have seen here. Think you, that when I am gone, and he shall grow up to manhood, and shall come forward to act his part among the citizens of the country, I will leave it to be cast in his teeth, as a reproach, that his father voted to send slavery into those territories ? No ; oh, no ; I look reverently up to the Father of us all, and fervently implore of Him to spare that child that reproach. May God forbid it.

* * * * *

It shall not be in the power of any man to shake a menacing finger at me, and look me in the face with a gibe of con-

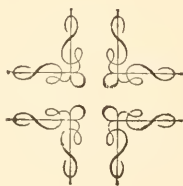
tempt, and say to me in the insulting language of a former representative from Virginia (Mr. Randolph), 'we have conquered you and we will conquer you again; we have not conquered you by the black slaves of the South, but by the white slaves of the North.' No, sir; that remark shall never apply to me. Gentlemen need not talk to me, or attempt to frighten me, by threats of the dissolution of the Union. Sir, I do not permit myself to talk or even think about the dissolution of the Union; very few northern men do. We all look upon such a thing as impossible. But, sir, if the alternative should be presented to me of the extension of slavery or the dissolution of the Union, I would say rather than extend slavery, let the Union, aye, the Universe itself, be dissolved. Never, never will I raise my hand or my voice to give a vote by which slavery can or may be extended. As God is my Judge, I cannot, I will not be moved from the purpose I have now announced.

* * * * *

Mr. Chairman, I have but imperfectly accomplished the duty I had assigned myself on this momentous question. But I am admonished that the pendulum of the clock is upon the last vibration of the hour allotted to me. I have made up the record of this day's work of my life imperfectly I know. But I am willing it should be unrolled and read by the whole people whom I have the honor to represent; I am willing it should be read by the people of this great country; above all, I am willing it should be unrolled and read by the light of Eternity, in the presence of the assembled universe, and to abide the decree of the Omnipotent Judge upon the record.

It is impossible to give an adequate description of the eloquence of this distinguished man. He must have been seen and heard to be appreciated. His great oratorical efforts were made many years ago. The men who were so charmed and captivated by his eloquence have passed away. A few still remain; they are scattered and inaccessible. It is only left for us to

glean what we can from a few printed speeches that have been preserved, and to brief biographical sketches and to anecdotes and traditions that have been handed down from a former generation. To these I have frequently referred and quoted in this paper. I am conscious that my work has been poorly done. If I have contributed in any manner to throw light on the character and services of this honored and idolized son of New Hampshire I am satisfied.



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